



From Polis to Madina: Urban Change in Late Antique and Early Islamic Syria

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FROM *POLIS* TO *MADINA*: URBAN CHANGE IN LATE ANTIQUE AND EARLY ISLAMIC SYRIA*

The civilization of classical antiquity was essentially urban, in the sense that the government was carried on from the cities, the upper classes lived in them and, after the fourth century, the ecclesiastical hierarchy was based in them too. The political and social importance of cities was reflected in the care which was lavished on their design.

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The literature on the towns of late antiquity in the Near East is vast and cannot be summarized here. For a general discussion of change and continuity during this period, see A. Kazhdan and A. Cutler, "Continuity and Discontinuity in Byzantine History", *Byzantion*, lii (1982), pp. 429-78. For Byzantine architecture in general, C. Mango, *Byzantine Architecture* (New York, 1979). On towns, D. Claude, *Die byzantinische Stadt im 6. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1969); C. Foss, "The Persians in Asia Minor and the End of Antiquity", *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, xc (1975), pp. 721-47; C. Foss, *Byzantine and Turkish Sardis* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976); C. Foss, *Ephesus after Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1979). On late antique Antioch, G. Downey, *Antioch in Syria* (Princeton, 1961); W. Liebeschuetz, *Antioch* (Oxford, 1972). For the fate of baths and theatres in Constantinople, C. Mango, "Daily Life in Byzantium", *Jahrbuch für österreichischen Byzantinistik* (1981), pp. 337-53. For post-classical Byzantine towns, C. Bouras, "City and Village: Urban Design and Architecture", *Jahrbuch für österreichischen Byzantinistik* (1981), pp. 611-53.

Discussion of the early Islamic city is less full and it is important to guard against using later evidence about the "traditional" Muslim city uncritically for the early period. A good introduction with full bibliography is E. Wirth, "Die orientalische Stadt", *Saeculum*, xxvi (1975), pp. 43-94. The best general account of the architecture remains K. A. C. Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1932-40), while important new evidence from written sources is provided in S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, 4 vols. (Berkeley, 1967-83), iv, pp. 1-105. The best discussions of individual towns are J. Sauvaget, "Le plan de Laodicée-sur-Mer", *Bulletin d'études orientales*, iv (1934), pp. 81-116; J. Sauvaget, *Alep* (Paris, 1941); J. Sauvaget, "Le plan antique de Damas", *Syria*, xxvi (1949), pp. 314-58.

From the classical Greek period onwards, standards of town design were developed which have been an inspiration to urban planners ever since.¹ The key features of this urban vision were the orderly planning of broad, paved streets, often edged with stately colonnades (stoas) and porticoes, the rectangular open spaces of the forums and agoras, and the monumental public buildings, the theatres, the baths, the basilicas and, later, the churches. With the political difficulties of the western empire from the third century onwards, the cities of the western part of the Roman world, apart from some areas of Italy, began to lose their classical aspect. Some seem to have become entirely deserted, many more retreated into a narrow fortified area where the inhabitants could provide defence which the state was no longer able to do. This change in design was reflected in the loss of social and political status; power and wealth shifted first to the rural estate and villa, then to the monastery, the manor and the castle. Political chaos and economic decline effectively destroyed the classical cities of western Europe.

In the eastern half of the empire the fate of cities was in striking contrast to that in the west. Here the tradition of urban life continued uninterrupted and the very centuries, fourth and fifth, which saw the decline of the urban economies of the west saw something of a boom in the east, especially in Syria, where the archaeological remains clearly point to expanding urban settlement in some areas. Nor did the coming of Islam from 632 onwards break this continuity. Certain cities declined, others became more important, but the traditions of urban life maintained themselves, it was still in the towns that the upper classes lived and it was from the towns that they exercised political power.² Paradoxically, however, this continuity of social and political function did not result in a continuity of architectural design and urban planning, even in cities like Damascus, Jerusalem and Aleppo where urban life and economic activity continued on the same sites. The broad, colonnaded streets were invaded and divided up by intrusive structures, both houses and shops, and became more like

¹ On classical town planning, J. B. Ward-Perkins, *Cities of Ancient Greece and Italy* (New York, 1974); A. N. Barghouti, "Urbanization of Palestine and Jordan in Hellenistic and Roman Times", in A. Hadidi (ed.), *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan* (Amman, 1982).

² For the Islamic cities of Syria, in addition to the works of Sauvaget cited above, N. Elisséeff, "Damas à la lumière des théories de Jean Sauvaget", in A. Hourani and S. M. Stern (eds.), *The Islamic City* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 157-77; N. Elisséeff, "Hims" and "al-Ladhikiyya", and O. Grabar, "al-Ḳuds", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn. (Leiden, 1954-).

narrow winding lanes than the majestic thoroughfares of classical antiquity; and the extensive, open agora, scene for markets and meetings, was gone. The other main features of the ancient city, the monumental buildings, disappeared almost entirely, to be replaced by the mosque and the small urban *hammam* or bath-house. Despite the continuity of urban life, the built environment went through a profound and lasting transformation.

The purpose of this article is to examine two interrelated aspects of this process. The first is the examination of the chronology of the changes, in particular to discover how far they antedated the Muslim conquest of the 630s and how far they occurred after that time. The second is to suggest some of the possible reasons for these changes. The most important issue here is how far the changes can be ascribed to the replacement of Christianity by Islam as the religion of the dominant social groups or, in other words, is the traditional Middle Eastern city, the *madina*, the result of the Islamization of society? Can we in fact call it the "Islamic city" or is it rather the product of longer-term social and economic changes of which the coming of the new religion was only one aspect?

These processes will be investigated in one area of the Byzantine empire, the provinces at the eastern end of the Mediterranean. In the sixth century these were known as Syria I and II, Phoenicia I and II, Palestine I, II and III and Arabia, but for simplicity the whole area will be referred to as Syria. It is an area for which the sources, literary and archaeological, are full enough to give us some idea of the nature of the changes, although some material from outside, notably from the great Asia Minor cities of Ephesus and Sardis will be included. It is also an area where, in contrast to Asia Minor, urban continuity was marked throughout the early middle ages, providing evidence of long-term trends.

In the mid-sixth century the classical vision of the city and of urban order was still very much alive. In the *Buildings* Procopius describes the reconstruction of Antioch by Justinian in the years after the Persian conquest of 540: "he laid it out with stoas and agoras, dividing all the blocks of houses by means of streets and making water-channels, fountains and sewers, all of which the city now boasts. He built theatres and baths for it, ornamenting it with all the other buildings by which the prosperity of a city is wont be shown".³

We should not take Procopius' description as an entirely accurate

³ Procopius, *Buildings*, ed. and trans. H. Dewing (London, 1940), pp. 170-1.

picture of the Syrian city of the second half of the sixth century. In many ways the rebuilding of Antioch was something of a rearguard action and may not have been as successful as the author would have us believe. We know from archaeological evidence that the main colonnaded street was rebuilt, if on a smaller scale, but excavations have not shown that the theatres and baths were effectively restored.⁴ Not surprisingly, in view of the circumstances, city walls were given priority and it is debatable how far urban life of the traditional pattern ever returned to the city. In other areas of Syria, even by Procopius' account, Justinian seems to have made little attempt to maintain the amenities of *polis* life. At the distant frontier fortress of Circesium on the Euphrates he is said to have rebuilt the baths, while at the pilgrimage town of Sergiopolis (Rusafa) he built stoas and houses as well as walls. Elsewhere his works were confined to religious building and fortifications, and even in cities like Cyrrhus and Palmyra, which he is said to have restored after they fell into ruin, the work did not consist of more than building defences and, in the case of Cyrrhus an improved water supply in case the city was besieged.⁵ There is no evidence that Justinian's reign saw a general revival of classical urban life in Syria.

If new constructions were very rare, it is difficult to tell how far existing classical public buildings were maintained and used during the sixth century.⁶ The fate of classical theatres illustrates the nature of the problem. All classical cities of any consequence in Syria had at least one theatre,⁷ and many like Philadelphia (Amman) and Gerasa (Jerash) had two, the smaller of which may have been used for council meetings.⁸ The last theatre known to have been constructed in Syria was the one built by the emperor Philip the Arab in the mid-third century to adorn his birthplace at Philippopolis in the Hawran, and

⁴ R. Stillwell, *Antioch-on-the-Orontes* (Princeton, 1934-52); J. Lassus (ed.), *Les portiques d'Antioche* (Princeton, 1977).

⁵ Procopius, *Buildings*, pp. 156-9, 174-7.

⁶ Continuity through the sixth century has been accepted by C. Foss and, to a lesser extent, by D. Claude, but there is little positive evidence and our knowledge of urban life in the second half of the sixth century is very scanty. Downey suggests a sharp decline in urban activity at Antioch after 540 (*Antioch in Syria*, pp. 557-9), and on this see H. Kennedy, "The Arab Conquest of Syria and Arabia", in J. Koumoulides and J. Haldon (eds.), *Byzantine Perspectives* (forthcoming), where it is argued that the second half of the sixth century sees fundamental changes in the economy and society of Byzantine Syria.

⁷ For the theatres of Syria, see E. Frézouls, "Recherches sur les théâtres de l'orient syrien", *Syria*, xxxvi (1959), pp. 202-8, and xxxviii (1961), pp. 54-86.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 85-6.

by Justinian's reign it was already three hundred years old. Despite Procopius' claims, there is no archaeological evidence for large-scale restorations of theatres in sixth-century Syria. We know that some were abandoned. The one at Pella of the Decapolis was invaded by small-scale structures during the Byzantine period,⁹ while at Caesarea in Palestine the theatre was incorporated into a new system of defences, probably late in the Byzantine period.¹⁰ Some literary evidence points in the same direction. In 502 the emperor Anastasius abolished the spring celebrations in the theatre at Edessa, probably in response to the opinion of local ecclesiastics like Jacob of Sarug, who denounced the performances as "dancing, sport and music, the miming of lying tales, teaching which destroys the mind, poems which are not true, troublesome and confused sounds, melodies to attract children, ordered and captivating songs, skilful chants, lying canticles composed according to the folly invented by the Greeks".¹¹ In the face of public opinion of this sort, it is unlikely that the theatre at Edessa survived the abolition of the spring festival. The life of St. Simeon Stylites the Younger, who lived near Antioch in the late sixth century, tells us a good deal about various aspects of city life, but there is no mention of the theatre or theatrical performances.¹² However, there were exceptions to this general picture. In the life of St. Simeon the Fool by Leontios of Neapolis we are given a vivid impression of urban life in Emesa (Hims) at the end of the sixth century.¹³ It shows continued urban vitality in many spheres — markets, baths, prostitution, taverns and the theatre. Not only does the theatre continue to be used for performances, clearly of a sort no Christian moralist could approve of, but there were still active theatre factions, although their function and importance is not clear from the text.¹⁴ The Persian invasions of the early seventh century probably put an end to any surviving performances in the theatres. Their taste was probably more for equine sports, as is suggested by the polo goal posts discovered in the hippodrome at Gerasa. The tradition of horse-

⁹ R. H. Smith, A. McNicoll and J. B. Hennessy, "The 1980 Season at Pella of the Decapolis", *Bull. Amer. Schools of Oriental Research*, ccxlv (1981), pp. 17-21.

¹⁰ R. C. Wiemken and K. G. Holum, "The Joint Expedition to Caesarea Maritima, 8th Season, 1979", *Bull. Amer. Schools of Oriental Research*, ccxlv (1981), p. 29; W. E. Kaegi, "Some Seventh-Century Sources on Caesarea", *Israel Exploration JI.*, xxviii (1978), pp. 177-81.

¹¹ Quoted in J. B. Segal, *Edessa, the Blessed City* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 163-5.

¹² *La vie ancienne de s. Syméon Stylite le jeune, 521-592*, ed. P. van den Ven, 2 vols. (Subsidia hagiographia, xxxii, Brussels, 1962-70).

¹³ *La vie de Syméon le fou*, ed. A. J. Festugière (Paris, 1974).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, caps. xvi, xxii, xxxv.

racing continued into Islamic times and some early Islamic cities had race tracks, but there is no evidence that other sorts of public performance survived the end of antiquity.¹⁵ After the Muslim conquest, theatres were abandoned, demolished (the fate, presumably, of the one St. Simeon the Fool performed in at Emesa since there is no trace of it today), converted into fortresses (Bostra) or adapted for industrial use (Gerasa, where an interesting series of Umayyad pottery kilns has recently been discovered in the North Theatre).¹⁶ The Islamic conquest certainly meant the end of the classical theatre but the evidence suggests that the decline had set in well before.¹⁷

The baths were another important amenity of the classical city, as Procopius makes plain. The history of public baths has not perhaps received the attention due to it, since these structures were an essential part of the urban society of both classical antiquity and the Muslim world. It has recently been suggested that the ancient tradition of public bathing almost died out in Constantinople in the seventh and eighth centuries.¹⁸ In the Middle East, however, the tradition of public baths seems to have lasted without interruption from antiquity to the present day. If you could not get a bath in the imperial city, you could certainly get one in Emesa (Hims) in the late sixth century, where the life of St. Simeon the Fool speaks of baths for both men and women (the saint, of course, choosing to enter the women's one). The public baths of Hims survived the Muslim conquest; in 724 St. Willibald and his fellow Christians were able to take advantage of one.¹⁹

¹⁵ C. H. Kraeling, *Gerasa, City of the Decapolis* (New Haven, 1938), pp. 86, 97. For horse-racing in the early Islamic period, see the literary references in M. M. Ahsan, *Social Life under Abbasids* (London, 1979), pp. 243-9.

¹⁶ I am grateful to Dr. J. Bowsher of the British Archaeological Mission to Jerash for pointing these out to me.

¹⁷ Further evidence from other parts of the Byzantine empire is given by Claude, *Byzantinische Stadt in 6. Jahrhundert*, pp. 74-6.

¹⁸ Mango, "Daily Life in Byzantium", pp. 338-41. The literary evidence for baths in the Byzantine period has been collected by A. Lumpe, "Zur Kulturgeschichte des Bades in der byzantinischen Ära", *Byzantinische Forschungen*, vi (1979), pp. 151-66. Lumpe has found virtually no textual evidence for public baths after the end of the seventh century.

¹⁹ *Vie de Syméon le fou*, ed. Festugière, cap. xiv; J. Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades* (Warminster, 1977). For baths in the Muslim world, see J. Sourdel-Thomime, "Hammâm", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn.; H. Grotzfeld, *Das Bad im arabisch-islamischen Mittelalter: eine kulturgeschichtliche Studie* (Wiesbaden, 1970); Ahsan, *Social Life under Abbasids*, pp. 196-201, which suffers from the attempt to give classical names to the chambers of a Muslim bath. For the contemporary organization of baths, R. B. Serjeant and R. Lewcock, *Sana': An Arabian Islamic City* (London, 1983), pp. 501-25.

While the practice of bathing continued, the design and scale of bath-houses changed very considerably. The great baths of the early imperial period had been at the centre of leisure complexes which included gymnasia and sometimes libraries. The gymnasia had disappeared by the end of the fourth century, but in some places, like Ephesus for example, the great bath-houses were still in use and were restored during the fourth and fifth centuries. An inscription from Antioch tells of the restoration of baths by the *comes orientis* Flavius in 537-8, just before the catastrophe which obliged Justinian to rebuild the city.²⁰ It is not clear that any of the old style bath-houses were still in use by the late sixth century, and in Syria, at least, a new style of bath-house was developed. The most important changes were the greatly reduced scale of the new ones and the suppression of the *frigidarium* which had been the largest chamber in most classical baths and the centre of social activity. Instead the new baths tended to have a number of small chambers of roughly similar size, the hot chamber gradually becoming more important at the expense of the intermediate ones in later centuries. Sometimes these baths were complemented by an enlarged version of the classical *apodyterium*, or changing room, which in some early Islamic princely baths became a large and sumptuous reception hall. The late antique type can be observed in the few baths found in the small towns of the limestone massif of northern Syria. The best example is that of Serjilla, given to the community by a local notable and dated by inscription to 473.²¹ The proportions of the rooms and their reduced dimensions are in striking contrast to earlier buildings.

Clear evidence for the changing nature of urban baths comes from Gerasa (Jerash). In the Roman period the city had boasted two massive bath-houses, one on each side of the river. There is no indication when these vast structures ceased to be used but in the mid-fifth century a new set of baths was built in the centre of the urban nucleus, near the cathedral, by Bishop Placcus (built 454-5, restored in 584).²² These were clearly public baths, since they open onto the street and there would have been no purpose in building

²⁰ Foss, *Ephesus after Antiquity*, pp. 54, 60, 70; Lassus, *Portiques d'Antioche*, p. 135.

²¹ G. Tchalenko, *Villages antiques de la Syrie du nord*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1953-8), i, pp. 25-8; H. C. Butler, *Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria in 1904-5 and 1909*, 9 vols. (Leiden, 1907-49), division II, section B, pt. 3, pp. 118-23. For general comments on the changing architecture of baths in late antiquity, Grotzfeld, *Bad im arabisch-islamischen Mittelalter*, pp. 28-9.

²² Kraeling, *Gerasa*, pp. 265-9.

them had the earlier baths still been functioning. The reduced scale of the baths of Placcus is striking, the entire complex could have been accommodated in the *frigidarium* of the old west baths, but with its small chambers and intimate proportions it looks forward to the bath houses of the Islamic city. The examples at Serjilla and Gerasa give support to the argument that the architectural origins of the Muslim bath should be sought in the baths of the Syrian towns of late antiquity.²³

These changes in architecture also point to changes in use. In the late antique and Islamic periods it would seem that citizens visited the baths to get clean, rather than to conduct the business of the day and improve their minds and bodies.

We have very little archaeological evidence about early Islamic urban bath-houses, although we know from abundant literary evidence that they existed. The series of medieval baths from Damascus and Cairo, which have been fully studied, go back no earlier than the twelfth century.²⁴ The most famous surviving Umayyad baths, at Qusayr Amra and Khirbat Mafjar, belong to princely residences rather than to urban communities and are as much reception halls as baths (a pattern which seems to go back to antiquity; for example, the baths and audience hall of the late antique palace of the *proconsul* of Asia at Ephesus).²⁵ The only surviving urban bath-houses seem to be those at the agricultural and commercial settlement of Qasr al-Hayr al-Sharqi in the Syrian desert.²⁶ Here there is one small bath within the walls which conforms to the pattern of Serjilla and the baths of Placcus. There is also a larger complex outside the fortifications which resembles the princely type and has a large changing room preceding the warm and hot rooms. In one respect, however, the early Islamic bath had more in common with the classical one than with the later Islamic. Late antique and Umayyad bath builders continued to use the hypocaust, though on a reduced scale, for

²³ For this argument, see O. Grabar, *City in the Desert* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), pp. 94-7. For an interesting transformation of a Roman bath to the early Islamic style, Y. Hirschfeld and G. Solar, "The Roman Thermae at Hammat Gadar", *Israel Exploration J.*, xxxi (1981), pp. 179-219.

²⁴ M. Ecochard, *Les bains de Damas* (Beirut, 1943); E. Pauty, *Les hammams du Caire* (Cairo, 1933).

²⁵ M. Almagro et al., *Qusayr Amra* (Madrid, 1975); R. W. Hamilton, *Khirbet al-Mafjar* (Oxford, 1959). For the palace at Ephesus, Foss, *Ephesus after Antiquity*, pp. 50-1.

²⁶ Grabar, *City in the Desert*, pp. 54-6, 90-7.

heating the hot chamber, whereas later Muslim baths used a simpler system of underfloor pipes from the furnace room.²⁷

The most complex and far reaching of the changes in urban design in late antiquity and the early Islamic period was the changing street layout. From Hellenistic times the cities of Syria had been distinguished by wide, straight streets crossing at right angles and by open public squares and markets, usually, but not always, rectangular in shape. Between the laying out of the Hellenistic street plan and the end of the Byzantine empire the typical main street had seen some changes. Originally some important individual buildings had porticoes looking onto the thoroughfare, but beginning with Herod the Great's development in Antioch in about 6 B.C. these were often incorporated in continuous colonnades along the whole length of the main street, and the important side ones as well. Libanius, writing in fourth-century Antioch, considered that the colonnaded street was one of the most important amenities the city had to offer.²⁸ Such colonnades survive in Gerasa, Palmyra and (reconstructed) Apamea to give us a clear picture of these structures. Such streets continued to be used in late antiquity, and excavations at both Sardis and Ephesus show that they were still being constructed in Asia Minor in the fourth and fifth centuries. The colonnaded streets of Jerusalem, which figure so prominently on the Madaba mosaic map, are thought to date from the Byzantine period, and we have already seen that Justinian took pains to rebuild the great street at Antioch in the 540s. Planners seem to have worked to a consistent scale for street widths in multiples of 18 *podes* (5.5 metres) with widths of up to 22 metres for the widest streets at Gerasa and Palmyra.²⁹ The colonnaded street was elegant but functional, it allowed the separation of wheeled traffic and pedestrians, the provision of covered sidewalks which enabled public life to be continued regardless of bad weather and position for spacious shops and houses. The comments of Libanius suggest that the columns might not always have been as unencumbered as the ruins and modern reconstruction suggest, but the overall impression was clearly one of spaciousness and order. Similarly the agoras were

²⁷ Grotzfeld, *Bad im arabisch-islamischen Mittelalter*, pp. 56-9, discusses the later history of the hypocaust.

²⁸ Libanius, *Antiochikos*, trans. A. J. Festugière, in *Antioche païenne et chrétienne* (Paris, 1959), pp. 26-7.

²⁹ M. Broshi, "Standards of Street Widths in the Roman-Byzantine Period", *Israel Exploration Jnl.*, xxvii (1977), pp. 232-6. For another early sixth-century street development, Wiemken and Holum, "Joint Expedition to Caesarea Maritima", p. 31.

surrounded by colonnades and showed the same regular appearance as the street.

The situation in the traditional Islamic city was very different. The spacious open street was frequently built over while the much narrower road (path might be a better description) often occupied the classical sidewalk, the road itself being built over and covered with shops or houses. In some cities like Aleppo and Jerusalem several narrow *suqs* were built parallel on the site of the single colonnaded street. The nature of this change was brilliantly illuminated fifty years ago by Sauvaget in a model which shows how the classical pattern was slowly altered and its character changed.³⁰ The evidence suggests that the process was one of continued development, rather than desertion and resettlement and that the area of the modern *suqs* of Aleppo, Damascus, Jerusalem and, probably, Hims have been market areas without interruption since classical times. Sauvaget suggested that the change occurred during a period of anarchy and weak government during the tenth century but it is now clear that the process began very much earlier. In Gerasa, for example, we find streets being built over and in some cases blocked during the late Byzantine period, and in Apamea the classical street plan was disrupted at the same time.³¹ The most recent commentator on the urban history of Damascus suggests that the process had begun there well before the Islamic conquest. Although the excavators assigned the building-over of the great street at Antioch to the early Islamic period, there is no firm evidence for this and the structures, built directly onto the pavement of Justinian's thoroughfare, may well date from the last years of Byzantine rule.³² Evidence has recently emerged in Palmyra showing the use of the colonnaded street as a site for a narrow *suq* in Umayyad times, very much as Sauvaget suggested.³³ In many residential areas through roads were converted into narrow, private culs-de-sac, simply giving access to the houses on each side. When Muqaddasi visited Damascus in the later tenth century all the

³⁰ First published in Sauvaget, "Plan de Laodicée-sur-Mer", and more recently in Hourani and Stern (eds.), *Islamic City*, p. 171. On the subject of markets, ancient and modern, E. Wirth, "Zum Problem des Bazaars", *Der Islam*, li (1974), pp. 203-60, and lii (1975), pp. 6-46.

³¹ Kraeling, *Gerasa*, pp. 115, 227, 294; J. and J.-C. Balty, *Actes du Colloque Apamée en Syrie* (Brussels, 1969), pp. 17, 41-3, 77, 114. For other examples, see Claude, *Byzantinische Stadt im 6. Jahrhundert*, pp. 44-5, 57-8.

³² Lassus, *Portiques d'Antioche*, pp. 149-50.

³³ Unpublished excavations by the Syrian Department of Antiquities. I am indebted to Dr. M. Gawlikowski for this information.

markets were roofed over except one, the "Street Called Straight", and the same was true of Aleppo and Jerusalem by the twelfth century if not before. Early Muslim legists discussing the required width for a public street suggested a mere seven cubits (slightly over three metres).³⁴

The design of commercial areas changed in another important respect. The *sucs* of the Islamic town were basically linear, essentially narrow streets bordered by small shops, and the open spaces of forum or agora ceased to function as a commercial centre. In Aleppo the agora was incorporated into the court of the great mosque in Umayyad times (early eighth century), while in Damascus it seems to have been built over and formed a residential district.³⁵ Smaller rectangular market areas did still exist, in the form of the covered *qaysariyya*, which Sauvaget saw as a direct descendant of the classical basilica, and the open courtyard of the *khan* (inn), but neither of these played the central role in urban life that the agora had done and neither was developed before the twelfth century. Where large open markets did exist, they were to be found outside the gates and catered for livestock and food brought from the surrounding country by peasants or bedouin. The high-status trades, fine textiles, jewelry, books, spices and the like were to be found in the *sucs* around the mosque, not in the open markets. There is some evidence of the infilling of urban open spaces in late antiquity (at Gerasa and Ephesus, for example) and that the change from open to linear markets was already underway in the fifth century;³⁶ as in other areas, it seems that the early Islamic period saw the continuation and full development of trends which had already existed before.

While the urban pattern of antiquity was disturbed in the sites we have been looking at so far, it is instructive to examine the townscape of newly emergent urban communities of the fifth and sixth centuries in Syria, cities where there was no classical town plan to affect later growth. In the area of the limestone massif of northern Syria, described by Tchalenko, there were at least two communities which could reasonably be described as urban in character. The first of

³⁴ G. Le Strange, *Palestine under the Moslems* (London, 1890; repr. Beirut, 1965), pp. 225, 364; R. Brunschvig, "Urbanisme médiéval et droit musulman", *Revue des études islamiques*, xvi (1947), p. 132. For the architectural development of the market of Fustat in this period, Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, iv, pp. 26-31.

³⁵ Sauvaget, *Alep*, p. 76; Sauvaget, "Plan antique de Damas", pp. 339-47.

³⁶ Kraeling, *Gerasa*, pp. 115, 157-8; Foss, *Ephesus after Antiquity*, p. 82; Foss, *Byzantine and Turkish Sardis*, pp. 42-3.

these was Kaprobarada (Brad),³⁷ north of Qal' at Sim'an. This was an ancient community which expanded considerably during the fifth and sixth centuries. By the second half of the sixth, the settlement had a decidedly urban aspect and seems to have been an administrative centre for the surrounding countryside. The late antique city boasted a number of churches, including one which Butler described as the "cathedral" on account of its size and congregational nature,³⁸ and an official residence for the local administrator. There was also a building which may have been an *andron*, or community meeting-place. Kaprobarada was clearly an artisanal and agricultural centre of some importance, probably performing the same economic functions as many classical cities, yet there is a total absence of formal town planning or public urban buildings other than churches. The "streets" were narrow winding paths, there was no agora, no colonnades, no theatre and the one bath was a small structure dating from an earlier period of development and quite inadequate for a community of that size. Another example can be found further south at Kapropera (Al-Bara).³⁹ This town seems to have developed from the end of the fourth century onwards. Again, the urban nature of the community is apparent and in the late sixth century it occupied an area of about 2×3 kilometres (although not all of this was built up). The size and elegance of the churches testify to its prosperity, yet once again there is no sign of classical planning and, apart from ecclesiastical structures, no public buildings. A pattern of narrow, winding, uneven streets formed the means of communication.

The examples of Kaprobarada and Kapropera can be paralleled elsewhere in the provinces of Syria and Arabia, in the recently investigated settlement at Umm al-Jimal,⁴⁰ for example. Nowhere from the entire area is there evidence of town planning on the classical model during the fifth and sixth centuries. Perhaps we should remember Butler's description of another expanding settlement of the period, Tarutia (Kerratin) in central Syria: "Tarutia was very much of a city. The houses, though large, were crowded together, the streets were narrow and the open squares few and small. The street entrances to the houses were pretentious . . . but the outer

³⁷ Tchalenko, *Villages antiques de la Syrie du nord*, ii, plate 43; Butler, *Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria*, II, B, 6, pp. 229-315.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, II, B, 6, pp. 305-6.

³⁹ Tchalenko, *Villages antiques de la Syrie du nord*, ii, plates 137-9.

⁴⁰ B. de Vries, "The Umm al-Jimal Project, 1972-7" *Bull. Amer. Schools of Oriental Research*, ccxlv (1981), pp. 53-72.

walls must have presented a grim appearance even though they were plastered over and may have been coloured, for the outer windows were few and narrow".⁴¹ Such then was the aspect of the late antique city.

The coming of Islam made one important contribution to the built environment of the town. A new sort of public building appeared, the mosque. In its most obvious aspect the mosque replaced the church as the place of worship for the political and social élite of the city: in Damascus in the early eighth century the church was taken over and demolished, in Aleppo cathedral and mosque coexisted on opposite sides of a narrow street until the twelfth century, while in Emesa (Hims) mosque and church were simply two halves of the same building throughout the early middle ages. But the mosque also replaced the agora as the main outdoor meeting-place in the city. In Damascus, the great court of the Umayyad mosque forms the only open space of any size within the walls of the old city while in Aleppo the mosque was actually built on the old agora, its wide court occupying the area of the classical open space. The mosque also replaced the agora and the theatre in a functional sense. Plays and mimes formed no part of the life of the *madina*, but the theatre had also had a political function as the scene of public meetings and formal political ceremonies,⁴² and it was these functions which were inherited by the mosque. It was here that the oath of allegiance, the *bay'at*, was taken to new rulers and the *khutba*, the weekly sermon in which the ruler's name was acknowledged, took place. It was here, too, that governors and caliphs could address the Muslims on matters of public importance. When Ziyad b. Abihi was appointed governor of Basra in 665 he assembled the people of the town in the mosque and warned them in no uncertain terms to behave themselves. Similarly in the confusion which followed the death of the young caliph Mu'awiya II in 684 the various contenders for power met in the mosque in Damascus. Later in the Umayyad period Yazid III, who had assassinated his predecessor Walid II in 744, addressed the people in the mosque at Damascus, laying before them his plans for reform and soliciting their support.⁴³ The public and political functions

⁴¹ Butler, *Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria*, II, B, 22, p. 72.

⁴² Liebeschuetz, *Antioch*, pp. 208-16.

⁴³ Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa'l-Muluk*, ed. M. de Goeje *et al.*, 3 vols. (Leiden, 1879-1901), ii, pp. 73-6, 468-72, 1834-6. For the many functions of the mosque in the early Islamic city, Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, iv, pp. 31-3.

which would have taken place in theatre, agora or hippodrome in Byzantine times now happened in the mosque. There is an interesting contrast here with medieval Italy where urban continuity was also strong. The cathedral of an Italian town did not provide a public open space in the way the courtyard of a Syrian mosque did. When the citizens of early medieval Pavia wished to gather to make their views heard, they did so in the square (*platea*) by the cathedral.⁴⁴ This may have been one of the reasons why open squares survived in the cities of Italy and not in those of Syria.

The mosque also took over the functions of other public buildings. It was usually in the mosque that the Muslim judge (*qadi*) held court, although there are records of early *qadis* using their own houses for this purpose. Until the appearance of the *madrasa* (theological college) in the eleventh century, the mosque also served as the centre for education in the religious and legal sciences, once again taking over the function of other forms of public architecture. The transformation of the monumental city of antiquity cannot be understood without appreciating the many different activities which took place in the mosque.

Early Muslim society did not deliberately choose to develop towns with narrow winding streets out of any conscious aesthetic or cultural preference, and the idea that there is something in the spirit of Islam which leads to the enclosed, private and secret world of the "Islamic city" should not be entertained by serious urban historians. The most important evidence for this comes from early Islamic planned towns. When Muslim rulers laid out new cities, they adopted orthogonal plans, dividing blocks of housing by straight and sometimes wide streets. The clearest example of this comes from the early eighth-century settlement at Anjar, in the Bīqā' valley just south of Heliopolis (Baalbak). Here the early Islamic city has four wide streets which meet at a central tetrapylon and the entire plan is ordered and regular. The same features are apparent in the contemporary settlement at Qasr al-Hayr East in the Syrian desert, where the small, planned *madina* has at its centre an open rectangular square surrounded by arcades. On a larger scale, the vast development of the ninth-century 'Abbasid capital at Samarra in Iraq shows a similar concern for order. Aerial photographs show clearly the very wide main street (much wider in fact than the main street, *cardo maximus*, of any Roman town

⁴⁴ D. A. Bullough, "Urban Change in Early Mediaeval Italy", *Papers of the British School at Rome*, xxxiv (1966), pp. 82-130.

in Syria) and the narrower streets which lead off it at right angles and divide the city into rectangular blocks for houses and gardens.⁴⁵ These examples suggest that where cities were planned, early Islamic surveyors (the *muhandisun*) had very similar ideas to those of their classical predecessors and these early Islamic settlements show much more concern for orderly urban development than the small towns of Byzantine Syria like Kaprobarada and Kapropera described above. Planned and unplanned cities always existed in Syria. The contrast is that in classical antiquity most cities including the largest and wealthiest were planned and ordered, in Islamic society they were not.

The picture which emerges from this study suggests that urban change in the Middle East took place over a number of centuries and that the development from the *polis* of antiquity to the Islamic *madina* was a long drawn out process of evolution. Many of the features which are often associated with the coming of Islam, the decay of the monumental buildings and the changes in the classical street plan, are in evidence long before the Muslim conquests. In other ways the evolution of the traditional Islamic town was not completed until much later; regular street plans were still laid out, if only occasionally (and it should be noted, we have no idea of the street plan of the greatest early Islamic new towns at Kufa and Basra in Iraq). The *khans*, caravansarais, *qaysariyyas* and *madrasas* of the traditional city seem to be developments of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. We should perhaps think in terms of a half millennium of transition.

Before considering the causes of these changes it is perhaps important to make two general points. The first is that we should avoid making inappropriate value judgements. The development of the Islamic city is often seen as a process of decay, the abandonment of the high Hippodamian ideals of classical antiquity and the descent into urban squalor. On the contrary, the changes in city planning may, in some cases, have been the result of increased urban and commercial vitality, as in early Islamic Damascus and Aleppo for example. It was rather that the built environment was adapted for different purposes, life-styles and legal customs. The changing aspect of the city was determined by long-term social, economic and cultural forces, not by administrative incompetence or aesthetic insensitivity.

⁴⁵ On Anjar, J. Sourdcl-Thomime and B. Spuler, *Die Kunst des Islam* (Propyläen Kunstgeschichte, iv, Berlin, 1973), pp. 163-6. On Qasr al-Hayr, O. Grabar, *City in the Desert*. On Samarra, Creswell, *Early Muslim Architecture*, ii; J. M. Rogers, "Samarra: A Study in Medieval Town Planning", in Hourani and Stern (eds.), *Islamic City*, pp. 119-55.

The second consideration is that public, open spaces, be they narrow *suqs* or wide colonnaded streets, will always be under pressure. They will only survive if they fulfil a perceived and generally acknowledged purpose and are protected by an active and vigilant civic authority. If the usefulness of such spaces is not accepted, then inevitably they will be encroached on and built over. As far as the planning of public open spaces is concerned, the historian must seek the reasons why the constraints which had prevented such encroachment in classical times were no longer operative in late antique and early Islamic cities.

What then were the factors which led to these urban changes? The first cause to be considered is demographic decline, caused by plague, invasion or both. Evidence suggests serious and sustained falls in population throughout the eastern Mediterranean in the aftermath of the bubonic plague of 540 and its successors. Many *poleis* never survived to become early Islamic *mada'in*, and the period of transition marks the end of their urban history: Chalcis (Qinnasrin) and Gerasa (Jerash) were virtually uninhabited by the tenth century. There is a second category, like Apamea, where the *polis* becomes an early Islamic village, its urban aspect and plan largely lost. There were also cities which were destroyed by earthquake, a factor which seems to have been especially important in the case of Beirut where the classical street plan and buildings were entirely obliterated by the tremor of 550 and the Islamic town developed on quite a different pattern.⁴⁶ But for other cities in the area there is no evidence of serious demographic problems; Damascus, Hims and Aleppo probably increased their populations between 500 and 750. Yet the changing nature of the built environment was as evident in towns which survived as in those which did not, and demographic decline alone cannot account for all the changes.

The differing role of government is important. In the early imperial period the patronage for public building came mostly from rich local citizens who provided funds for the construction of massive monumental complexes. With the decline of civic self-government in late antiquity this patronage passed to the emperor and his local

⁴⁶ On plague and plague mortality in this period, see the important work of L. Conrad, "Plague in the Early Medieval Near East" (Princeton Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 1981). Earthquake damage is described in John Malalas, *Chronographia*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Patrologia Graeca, xcvi, Paris, 1865), p. 704. The damage caused by the earthquake is attested by the Piacenza Pilgrim: Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades*, p. 79. For the plan of pre-modern Beirut, Comte du Mesnil du Buisson, "Les anciens défenses de Beyrouth", *Syria*, ii (1921), pp. 238-57, 317-27.

representatives, a process which reached its logical conclusion in the first half of the sixth century when the remaining functions of city councils were abolished and their treasuries confiscated.⁴⁷ After the mid-sixth century, however, even central government patronage, as recorded in inscriptions, virtually dried up except in areas like the Euphrates valley which lay on the direct route of Persian invasions. By the sixth century, too, such imperial patronage as there was had shifted towards religious buildings rather than secular monuments, sometimes in rural rather than urban settings; in Ephesus, for example, the only major work of the sixth century was the construction by Justinian of the church of St. John outside the city. In some cases the bishop seems to have taken over from the council or the imperial government, and provided amenities for the city. In Gerasa the bishop funded the building of baths, and it is interesting to note that the church also provided bathing facilities in eighth-century Rome. John of Ephesus describes how the patriarch of Antioch secured funding from the emperor Maurice (582-602) for the building of both a hippodrome and a theatre (described as a "church of Satan") at Antioch, but the story may be no more than an attempt by the staunchly monophysite John to discredit the Chalcedonian patriarch.⁴⁸ There is little evidence that episcopal patronage of civic building compensated for the drying up of other sources of revenue. Apart from the rebuilding of Antioch, previously discussed, there is virtually no evidence of imperial patronage of secular building in sixth-century Syria. The government took over the finance of building and maintenance of public monuments from the cities and their councils and was then unwilling or unable to sustain its commitments.

The confiscation of town revenues also put an end to many of the activities which had taken place in the monumental buildings. In classical antiquity, both the public baths and the theatrical performances had been financed by subsidies from the town revenues, rather than being run on an economic basis. Whether such subsidies continued into the fifth century is not clear. Baths were certainly built under

⁴⁷ For the patronage of building in late antiquity, Foss, *Ephesus after Antiquity*, pp. 21-9; Liebeschuetz, *Antioch*, pp. 132-6. For the decline of city councils, A. H. M. Jones, "Cities of the Roman Empire: Political, Administrative and Judicial Institutions", *Recueils du Société Jean Bodin*, vi (1954), pp. 135-73; Liebeschuetz, *Antioch*, pp. 167-86.

⁴⁸ Foss, *Ephesus after Antiquity*, p. 25; R. Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City* (Princeton, 1980), p. 111; Iohannis Ephesini, *Historiae ecclesiasticae pars tertia*, trans. E. W. Brooks (Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium, cvi, Louvain, 1964), pp. 202-3.

private patronage at this time and the examples at Serjilla and Gerasa have already been cited, but it is not clear whether these were endowed with funds for their operation or whether they demanded payment from those who used them; the small scale of the latter construction and the fact that it had only one entrance may suggest the latter.⁴⁹ There is no tradition of subsidized bathing in the Islamic period; customers paid, as they still do today, for the services provided, and it is possible that this reflects late antique practice and accounts in some measure for the development of the new style of bath architecture during this period.

The pattern of government patronage in the early Islamic period was very different from the classical model. In many ways the early Islamic state was a minimalist state which saw no reason to interfere in the activities of its subjects except when disturbances might result. It provided physical security for the Muslims in the shape of city walls, mosques for them to worship in and, usually, a supply of running water. Muslim authorities considered the supply of water by canals or aqueducts as an essential service, partly for ritual reasons since ablution was essential before worship. The pattern visible in Italy, where the aqueducts of the classical period are frequently replaced by wells in the early middle ages, is not usually found in the Islamic world. The Umayyads certainly spent money on building, too much their critics alleged, but their projects, apart from the great mosques, were palaces in both town and country, and agricultural developments with their related settlements, of which Qasr al-Hayr East is an excellent example. They did not spend money on beautifying the streets of Damascus or on putting on public entertainments. It seems probable too that the government in Umayyad times was comparatively poor. In most areas of the Caliphate the taxes collected were distributed to the Muslims in the provinces concerned; that is, most of the revenues collected in Iraq were spent in Iraq and only a very small surplus, if any, was forwarded to the government.⁵⁰ In modern economic terms, the government controlled a much smaller proportion of the gross imperial product than under the Roman

⁴⁹ For evidence of payment for baths in late antiquity, Lumpe, "Zur Kulturgeschichte des Bades in der byzantinischen Ära", pp. 156-7.

⁵⁰ The problem of finance of government in the early Islamic state has received very little attention; for the Umayyad period there are some very interesting points in D. C. Dennett, "Marwan II and the Passing of the Umayyad Caliphate" (Harvard Univ. Ph.D. thesis, 1939). Under the 'Abbasids after 750, revenue collecting became more centralized and the government did embark on large-scale urban developments like those at Baghdad and Samarra.

empire. Consequently both the need and the resources for government patronage of urban building were greatly reduced, and government patronage of monumental secular building, which had become increasingly erratic during the last century of Byzantine rule, ceased altogether in the early Islamic period.

The changing legal system may have been a factor in urban development. Roman law made a sharp distinction between state and private property and it was the function of government to prevent private building on the public domain. It did not matter whether such trespassing caused problems or not, it was still illegal and the local governor was enjoined to stop it. Clearly there were many cities where such laws were not fully enforced in the sixth century but the legal provision did exist and could be called on if necessary. Roman law also concerned itself with the aesthetic aspects of the townscape, forbidding structures which degraded its appearance.⁵¹ Here again such laws could only be effective if the resources and will to enforce them existed but they did show that the appearance of the city was a feature with which rulers should concern themselves.

Islamic law on property starts from a quite different basis.⁵² For Muslim jurists the important unit was the family and its house. Broadly speaking, it was held that they should be allowed to do anything they chose as long as it did not harm their neighbours. Furthermore, the house was held to have some rights over the adjoining public space. This legal framework could have important repercussions for urban planning. At its most simple it meant that a man could extend his house into the street or build an overhanging balcony without needing to seek permission from anyone. If his neighbours felt that the new construction was harming them, by preventing access to their own property for example, it was up to them to take the case to the *qadi* who could, if he felt that it was necessary, order that the new structure should be demolished. But the enforcement was the result of private prosecution by those who were harmed rather than by the state authorities. Equally the *muhtasib* (market inspector) would only take action against obstructions if they caused a nuisance. When in 918 Rotgerius of Pavia, an Italian city where the old Roman concept of public streets was still very much alive, wished to build a balcony from his house over the street, he was obliged to get a licence, presumably at some expense and

⁵¹ Claude, *Byzantinische Stadt im 6. Jahrhundert*, pp. 54-5.

⁵² Brunschvig, "Urbanisme médiéval et droit musulman".

inconvenience, from the king;⁵³ if he had lived in a Muslim city, no such permission would have been necessary and he and people like him would have been much more tempted to enlarge their properties at the expense of the public street. The jurists also held that if a man owned property on both sides of a street, he could lawfully cover it over with an arch and build rooms on it, thus converting the street into a tunnel. In the case of a small cul-de-sac, the owners of the properties could, if they all agreed, place a gate across the entrance, thus converting a previously public road into a semi-private court, a feature typical of the medieval Islamic townscape. When it came to individual constructions, the law was equally easygoing. Aesthetic considerations played no part whatever; the fact that a building was an unsightly ruin did not mean that the owner could be compelled to tidy it up and only if it was actually dangerous could those threatened take action. While the law took no account of appearance, it was deeply concerned with privacy. If one man built his house so that it overlooked another's then the offended neighbour could go to law, since he had been harmed.

These legal changes obviously affected urban development, but too much importance should not be attached to them. Archaeological evidence shows clearly that the strict injunctions against trespassing on the public domain were unable to save the classical city layout when other social and economic factors proved too strong. Similarly, Muslim law did allow remedies for gross interference in urban functions. If someone blocked up a major traffic artery, for example, the *quadi* would decide against him and the structure concerned would have to be removed. If the Muslim community had perceived that wide colonnaded streets and spacious agoras were vital to their well-being, then they could have proceeded to law to protect them. It is clear, however, that they did not consider this to be the case, and while Muslim legists agreed that important streets must remain open, they only needed to be wide enough to allow two loaded pack animals to pass each other.

Another contributory element in the transformation of the urban pattern was the changing social structure of the cities.⁵⁴ In general, classical cities do not seem to have been the centre of great industrial or commercial activity. Obviously there were exceptions; we have

⁵³ Bullough, "Urban Change in Early Medieval Italy", p. 108.

⁵⁴ For the economic and social structure of the cities, Jones, "Cities of the Roman Empire"; A. H. M. Jones, "The Economic Life of the Towns of the Roman Empire", *Recueils du Société Jean Bodin*, vii (1955), pp. 161-92.

ample evidence of the trade of Tyre and Palmyra in the classical period and there was certainly some commercial activity in Tyre and Caesarea in Palestine up to the late sixth and early seventh centuries.⁵⁵ In the main, however, commerce and manufacture do not seem to have been the most important factor in the prosperity of towns. This impression is strengthened by the Arab historian Baladhuri's account of the early Islamic conquest of the area. Only in the case of Caesarea does he mention any markets, although he does quote a treaty which makes provision for the merchants of Heliopolis (Baalbak).⁵⁶ Elsewhere the impression is given of an overwhelmingly rural economy. The classical city seems to have depended for its existence on the fact that neighbouring landowners lived in it to take part in social and political activities; in the words of A. H. M. Jones, "The city was a social phenomenon, the result of the predilection of the wealthier classes for the amenities of urban life".⁵⁷ This seems to have remained true in the Byzantine period, when the city also became the centre of the ecclesiastical administration as well, and as late as 570 the Piacenza pilgrim comments that Apamea was the place of residence for all the nobility of the area.⁵⁸ This city élite was also dependent on the government in the sense that much of their wealth derived from their role as tax-collectors and administrators in the surrounding rural areas,⁵⁹ and when the tax ceased to be collected the cities suffered greatly. Although we know that some Byzantine financial administrators retained their positions up to and beyond the Islamic conquest,⁶⁰ the wars of the Persian occupation must have meant a serious interruption of the tax-collecting machinery and consequently in wealth and importance of the urban aristocracy. In addition, many of the Greek-speaking upper classes fled Syria at the

⁵⁵ For Tyre, Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades*, p. 79; for Caesarea, Ahmad b. Jabir al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-Buldan*, ed. S. Munajjid (Cairo, 1957), pp. 166-7, trans. P. K. Hitti, *The Origins of the Islamic State* (New York, 1916), p. 217.

⁵⁶ The Baalbak treaty is given in al-Baladhuri, *Futuh al-Buldan*, p. 154 (trans. Hitti, pp. 198-9).

⁵⁷ Jones, "Cities of the Roman Empire", p. 170.

⁵⁸ Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades*, p. 89.

⁵⁹ For the role of government and taxation in sustaining the late antique social order, see C. J. Wickham, "The Other Transition: From the Ancient World to Feudalism", *Past and Present*, no. 103 (May 1984), pp. 3-36. Townspeople also acted as moneylenders to the villagers, and in some areas of the eastern empire there seems to have been a real problem of peasant indebtedness. See John of Ephesus, "Life of Habib", in *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, ed. and trans. E. W. Brooks (Patrologia orientalis, xvii, Paris, 1923), pp. 5-18.

⁶⁰ The family of St. John of Damascus, for example.

time of the Arab conquests and it may well be that the old style political élite had almost vanished by the late seventh century.

Neither bureaucrats nor landowners, who were often the same people, paid much attention to the needs of commerce, and merchants had a low social status. It was not that there were no merchants in the towns, but rather that they did not form the dominant, decision-making élite. This cultural prejudice was reinforced by Christian suspicions of money-making activities. Nor did the government patronize urban markets to any great extent; indeed it operated outside the monetary economy, obtaining the goods and services it needed by payments in kind and requisition.

This is not to say that commerce was stagnant in the late sixth and early seventh centuries. Archaeological evidence make it clear that trade in north African pottery remained common in the eastern Mediterranean right into the seventh century.⁶¹ But this trade was not necessarily based in towns. In the fourth century Libanius explained how the villagers in the hinterland of Antioch exchanged goods at local fairs rather than coming to the great city to do business. This impression of rural self-sufficiency is confirmed by the life of St. Simeon Stylites the Younger whose monastery, although only a few miles from Antioch, seems to have been economically self-contained rather than relying on the city and its services. In the sixth century there is evidence of the growing importance of Christian shrines in the life of the community and it is possible that the pilgrimage centre and its attendant fair was a more important focus for commercial activity than the urban market. Great shrines like those of St. Thecla at Seleucia in Cilicia, St. Sergius at Resafa and St. Leontios at Tripoli clearly attracted vast numbers of devotees and must have become natural centres of exchange.⁶² Archaeological evidence reveals the existence of numerous shops and what can usefully be described as a *suq* at Dayr Sim'ān, just below the great shrine of St. Simeon Stylites the Elder. Building of monasteries and hostels at Dayr Sim'ān continued right through the sixth century, testifying to the continued popularity and prosperity of the pilgrim-

⁶¹ H. Blake, "Medieval Pottery: Technical Innovation or Economic Change?", in H. Blake *et al.* (eds.), *Papers in Italian Archaeology* (Brit. Archaeol. Repts., Supplementary Ser., xli pt. 2, Oxford, 1978), pp. 435-72.

⁶² For pilgrimage centres, Claude, *Byzantinische Stadt im 6. Jahrhundert*. For the shrine of St. Thecla, G. Dagron, *Vie et miracles de ste Thècle* (Subsidia hagiographia, lxii, Brussels, 1978), miracles 26, 29, 41. For Leontios of Tripoli, J. M. Fiey, "Le martyron de st Léonce à Tripoli", *Le musée*, xcv (1982), pp. 77-98.

age.⁶³ The most successful market in the Middle East at this time was the pilgrimage centre at Mecca in western Arabia where, in the late sixth century, the ancient *haram* (holy place) had become the centre of a flourishing trade which attracted merchants from all over Arabia. Despite the Meccan origins of many of the leading figures in early Islamic Syria, the Muslim conquest seems to have put an end to any pilgrimage fairs in Syria. In other Muslim countries, Morocco for example, pilgrimage fairs became and remained an important part of the local economy. The early Arab geographers mention no such gatherings in Syria. Muslim rule in fact brought the focus of commercial activity firmly within the city walls.

The Islamic city was very different. Muhammad himself was a merchant from a merchant city, and many famous early Muslims had engaged in trade, including the first caliph, Abu Bakr. Early *hadiths*, the traditions of the Prophet, emerge to the effect that honest commerce was more meritorious than government service, and the prosperous trader was regarded as a pillar of society. When Muslim geographers describe a city, they mention the mosque and the markets, their extent, prosperity and the different sorts of goods for sale. For them it is the commerce of the city rather than its monumental buildings which are the chief source of interest. It was from the merchant class too that the much respected jurists and *qadis* were drawn, not from the ranks of government servants or of the military.⁶⁴ It was natural then that the design of the city reflected the needs of this class and that the Muslim city allowed the commercial considerations to outweigh the dictates of formal planning. This is most obvious in the case of the market areas. The main consequence of the change from the open colonnaded street to the crowded *suq* was to increase the number of retail shops in the city centre as the old shops were subdivided and new structures were erected in the old roadway. Urban design now responded directly to commercial pressures and

⁶³ Butler, *Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expeditions to Syria*, II, B, 6, pp. 265-80; Tchalenko, *Villages antiques de la Syrie du nord*, i, pp. 201-22.

⁶⁴ Islamic attitudes to merchants are investigated by S. D. Goitein, "The Rise of the Near Eastern Bourgeoisie", *Cahiers d'histoire mondiale*, iii (1956-7), pp. 583-604. See also H. Cohen, "The Economic Background and Secular Occupations of Muslim Jurisprudents and Traditionalists in the Classical Period of Islam", *Jl. Econ. and Social Hist. of the Orient*, xiii (1970), pp. 16-61. Particularly important in this context is the commercial background of many of the *qadis* or judges, since it was they who would take decisions about the legality or otherwise of building operations. Examples from Egypt are cited in Goitein, *Mediterranean Society*, ii, pp. 365-7, and from Iran in R. Bulliet, *Patricians of Nishapur* (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), pp. 20-7.

no government action was taken to counter such pressures in the name of the inviolability of public lands or of aesthetic considerations.

Another cause of change was a fundamental shift in the means of transporting goods. It has recently been argued that wheeled transport effectively disappeared in the Middle East between the fourth and eighth centuries.⁶⁵ There are no references to chariots or carts in the early Islamic sources, and the Arabic vocabulary for describing such vehicles is very rudimentary. The late seventh-century pilgrim Arculf commented on the absence of carts in Syria and Palestine.⁶⁶ The reasons for this were essentially economic; improved techniques of camel domestication meant that pack animals were more efficient at transporting goods. This had the consequence of reducing the very high cost of overland transport which had inhibited trade in antiquity. Wheeled transport, as we know from contemporary experience, has a profound effect on urban planning. Wide streets, kept clear of obstructions, were vital for the free movement of goods, and the wheel marks often found indented in the stone paving of classical streets are testimony to the volume of this traffic. As late as the fifth century the top end of the Embolos at Ephesus was blocked to prevent wheeled traffic using the commercial street from entering the pedestrian area of the agora. Pack animals on the other hand, require no such extravagant provision; a simple winding path between shops and houses, up and down steps if necessary, is all that is needed and, as mentioned above, the jurists only required that two loaded pack animals be able to pass in the public street. Hence the broad colonnaded street ceased to fulfil an essential function in the urban environment. It might have been aesthetically desirable, but in functional terms it was simply redundant and pressure to keep it open was relaxed. The invasion of this valuable town centre space by stalls and shops soon followed naturally. The disappearance of wheeled traffic in late antiquity and the early Islamic period must have had a profound effect on urban planning.

The transformation of the classical *polis* into the Islamic *madina* must be seen as the product of long-term social and economic changes. Furthermore it was a complex process, different forces being at work at different times. Levels of population, means of transporting goods and a changing social structure all played their part, and the coming of Islam was simply one stage in the long transformation which began

⁶⁵ For the argument and the details, R. Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975).

⁶⁶ Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades*, p. 106.

in the sixth century or earlier and was probably not complete until the tenth or eleventh. To the slowly evolving city, Islam contributed a new type of public building and a new attitude to public law and administration.

It should not be imagined that the process of the decay of the classical street plan and monumental buildings necessarily meant that the city was less vital or thriving. In some cases it clearly did; the huts on the disused forum at Luni (Italy) indicated a serious decline in prosperity and population, and the same can probably be argued for Antioch or Gerasa in Syria. Paradoxically, however, the intrusion of new building into the open spaces of antiquity after the Islamic conquest may actually indicate increased urban commercial activity and pressure on land in the city centre.

The history of the cities of Syria in late antiquity was similar to that in other areas of the Mediterranean. The general picture of urban decline in late sixth-century Italy can be paralleled by that in late sixth-century Syria, and the Persian invasions from 540 onwards were as destructive in their way as the Lombard invasions of Italy. What distinguishes Syria from the areas of Christian Europe, however, is the success of some towns, mostly inland ones, from the Islamic conquest onwards. City-based government and increased commercial activity resulting from the opening up of land-routes in the Middle East saw the emergence of a new type of city whose design derived not from the ordered urban environment of classical antiquity but rather from the chaotic plan of the sixth-century town out of which it grew.

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